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ABSTRACT

School counselors have always considered themselves to be change agents. Historically, that change has been related to helping an individual become aware of behaviors or attitudes that might be affecting his/her success and then guiding that individual into new ways of acting or thinking. This skill is transferable to affecting change in the learning environment or the school climate. School counselors need to position themselves as facilitators of that change. Reform approaches in which school counselors can become involved include: site-based management; privatization of schools; and restructuring within schools such as team teaching, flexible scheduling, integrated learning, and cooperative learning. (ABL)

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Educational Reform and the School Counselor

Nancy S. Perry

Overview

Educational reform is certainly not a new idea but it has been gaining momentum in the last half of the 20th Century. From the wake-up call of Sputnik in 1957, Americans have been examining their educational systems with increasing regularity. The publication of studies and books in the 1980s lighted a torch that was carried to every state in the Union. Most reacted with a "let's get serious about education" reform package which included increased graduation requirements and academic expectations. To the chagrin of educators and the general public, more of the same did not seem to make a difference. The 1990s heralded a more serious effort to look at the roots of public education and to question the very structure of its existence. Thus was born the movement towards restructuring of education.

Rationale for Reform

The news has been devastating. U.S. high school graduates are not able to perform entry level tasks in the new workplace of technology and information services. International studies show the United States to be well down the educational list by almost every measure. The world has changed, yet, the United States has steadfastly held to the structure of the industrialized society of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. We still train our students to passively accept the information given and to react with a uniform feedback method. In the industrialized society, workers were to perform, not think. In the technological society, critical thinking is the expectation; team problem solving is the norm. We have even held onto a remnant of the agrarian society—the summer recess during which students would help on the farm. The conclusion is obvious. We are educating today's students with the schools of yesterday for the world of tomorrow.

Reform Models

We will examine a few of the more prominent approaches being used to make changes. These include site-based management, privatizing of schools, and restructuring within schools such as team teaching, flexible scheduling, integrated learning, and cooperative learning. It also includes concepts such as performance-based appraisal and total quality management. We will also review the literature and research which is having a significant impact on this movement such as the *Report of the Secretary's Commission on Necessary Skills* (SCANS, 1991); *America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages* (National Center on Education and the Economy, 1990); and *Horace's School* (Sizer, 1991).

The Role of the School Counselor

Site-based management is the approach to reform that transfers most of the decision-making powers to the local school and the staff and parents in that school. The rationale is based on the quality circle concept that the best decisions are made closest to the source of their implementation. Overall budgets are set district-wide but the players in the school—administration, teachers, parents, students, support staff—are given the right, and responsibility, to determine how the money will be spent. They set the priorities and goals for the school and decide how those can best be implemented. They often control personnel issues such as the numbers and types of staff needed. The governance is usually through a steering committee with representatives from the populations involved. The school counselor has important functions within this structure. First, the counselor should make every effort to become a member of the steering committee. School counselors have the negotiating and process skills which can assist in facilitating the work of the group. They also have a unique perspective on the total educational process in a school because, not being in the hierarchy of authority, they hear the real issues of teachers, students, parents, and administrators. This comprehensive perspective, combined with human relations skills, makes school counselors valuable and influential members of site-management committees.

Privatization of Schools

Many people feel that schools would be more successful if they were run as businesses and competed with each other. This is the basis for both the privatization of the educational system and the voucher choice issue which would allow a certain amount of dollars per student no matter what kind of school was chosen. This is not yet a reality, so any idea is speculative. However, if schools are competing for attendance, the school counselor will no doubt become involved in the "selling" of the school to perspective students. They may also have a unique responsibility in helping students to understand and discriminate among media messages, such as advertisements in textbooks, which may become a part of financing private education.

Restructuring Strategies

The middle school philosophy has had a profound effect on our understanding of how children learn. Concern for the whole child, team teaching, flexible scheduling, integration of disciplines, are a few of the restructuring concepts which had their genesis in the middle school movement. We are now realizing that at every level, learning must be connected and integrated if it is to be perceived as relevant to the learner. High school faculties are beginning to work as teams to make their disciplines more meaningful to today's student. As the walls of tradition begin to crumble, the obvious need to be concerned with the whole child has spawned a number of strategies in which the school counselor should be involved. If a team approach is used, the school counselor should meet regularly with the team to consult, advise, and act as a resource. Many

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schools are adopting teacher advisor programs (Myrick, 1989) which connect each student with a caring adult. School counselors are vital to the functioning of this program as providers of staff development for the teacher advisors; creators of life skills curriculum which can be taught in the advisee groups; resources for information and ideas; and consultants to the teacher advisors. Experience has shown that teacher advisors, as they get to know their students on a different level, have also referred more students to counselors for non-academic reasons. Cooperative learning presents another opportunity for school counseling programs to be integrated into the educational program. Cooperative learning is usually content based—such as math or science. However, half of the learning involves the social skills needed to work as a team—listening, articulating clearly, persuading, negotiating, decision-making, problem solving—to name a few. School counselors are logical resources to help teachers use cooperative learning in the most effective manner.

America 2000 National Education Goals

Although school counselors are not mentioned in the six national education goals, they are central to the success of this reform program. **Goal #1**, readiness to learn, is certainly the domain of the elementary school counselor. However, readiness is a process, not an event, and school counselors are keenly aware of the personal and environmental issues which create a climate for learning. **Goal #2** is concerned with keeping students in school. Most dropout prevention programs and alternative learning programs involve school counselors. However, the school counselor has a responsibility for all students in ensuring access to needed services by advocating for students who may have personal issues interfering with their learning. **Goal #3** addresses academic proficiency and preparation for responsible citizenship and productive employment. School counselors assist students in acquiring skills for planning, monitoring, and managing personal, career, and lifestyle development. Responsibility for oneself is the cornerstone of this learning. **Goal #4** deals with world class achievement in math and science. School counselors help students to relate academic achievement to personal career success. **Goal #5** states the need for adult literacy in a global society. School counselors encourage personal growth and development throughout the life span. They also ensure that those who come from a culturally diverse background will have access to appropriate services and opportunities that promote maximum development. The last goal is the bailiwick in which principals and counselors must work closely together to develop a school setting free of drugs and violence and to provide a disciplined environment conducive to learning. School counselors are vital to the achievement of the National Education Goals (Perry, 1992).

Workforce Requirements

Two significant works have been published in the 1990s relating education to the workplace. The reports of the SCANS Commission (*What Work Requires of Schools* and *Learning a Living*) clearly indicate that the worker of the future will need to have certain personal qualities and interpersonal skills in order to effectively apply the knowledge gained through schooling. Certainly, self-esteem, decision-making, self-management and communication skills are within the realm of the life skills taught in a guidance curriculum. *Learning a Living* suggests that each student should complete a resume indicating the level of mastery of these skills. The National Center on Education and the Economy (1990) demonstrates how America will never effectively compete with other countries for low wages. The only other choice is to assure that our workers have the high skills necessary to compete in the global market. This challenge should be a motivating tool for counselors working with students to develop critical thinking and problem solving by choosing higher level courses in school. All students considering choice of careers should have a clear understanding of the consequences of not becoming highly skilled.

Concepts of Reform

Total quality management (TQM) is the concept of infusing quality into the process rather than quality control as the culminating event of a process. It is based on understanding the needs of the "customer" and working to meet those needs. In the educational setting, the "customer" of the school counselor may vary according to the situation. Customer populations may include students, parents, faculty, and community. TQM would ask the question, "What do you want and how can I help you get it?" By working with these populations to meet their needs, quality is being infused into the system. Performance appraisal is closely linked with this process. Such tools as portfolios of "best" work would be used to assess progress on a continuing basis rather than relying solely on standardized testing or final exams. School counselors, as assessment experts, will need to become the key players in helping others to understand the concept of performance appraisal and setting the standards of performance.

Conclusion

School counselors have always considered themselves to be change agents. Historically, that change has been related to helping an individual become aware of behaviors or attitudes that might be affecting his/her success and then guiding that individual into new way of acting or thinking. This skill is transferable to affecting change in the learning environment or the school climate. Change is the heart of educational reform. School counselors need to position themselves as facilitators of that change.

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